FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
May 6, 2001

"CALLED"
John M. Buchanan

Vocation. It comes from the Latin *vocare*, to call, and means the work a person is called to by God. There are different kinds of voices calling you to all different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than of Society, say, or the Superego, or Self-interest. By and large a good rule for finding this out is this: The kind of work God calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done. Neither the hair shirt nor the soft birth will do. The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.

Frederick Buechner
Wishful Thinking

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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CALLED
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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Jeremiah 1:4-10
Mark 1:16-20

"Then I said, 'Ah, Lord God!' Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.'" Jeremiah 1:6 (NRSV)

Dear God, we give you thanks for this day, for all the blessings of our life together, for the privilege of being here together in worship. We come with questions, doubts, fears, concerns; we come with our love for others, parents who are ill, children in need, friends who are sick; we come with concerns about our own lives, decisions to make, doors to open or close. And we ask you to be with us: gather up all that we have brought here today and give us not easy answers but strength and courage to love as your faithful people, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In the motion picture *Chariots of Fire,* there is an unforgettable scene and line about deciding to do what one has to do and what one is called to do. The story is about the 1924 Olympic Games and a Scottish runner, a world-class sprinter, by the name of Eric Liddell. Liddell is the son of a minister. He's a theological student at the University of Edinburgh, preparing to be a missionary. But he can run, and to compete in the Olympics, he must discontinue his theological studies in order to train properly. The scene I will never forget occurs on a windswept hilltop, Arthur's Seat, I believe, in Edinburgh. Liddell and his sister are talking about his decision. She is arguing that he ought to forget about running and listen to God's call to the mission field. And Liddell says, "I believe God made me for a purpose; but he also made me fast. And when I run I feel his pleasure. To give it up would be to hold him in contempt; to win is to honor him."

And so Liddell decides to run—to feel the pleasure of God, to honor God by running. The reason the movie was made was Liddell's decision to drop out of the 100-meter dash because the event was scheduled for Sunday, and his strict Scottish Sabbatarianism would not allow it. Coaches, politicians, teammates, even British royalty, tried to persuade him to run, but he would not budge. Finally, a teammate, Harold Abrahams, who was Jewish and the British 400 meter champion, suggested that he and Liddell swap events. Liddell agreed and entered the 400, a very different and obviously longer event. Abrahams entered the 100. Remarkably, both won gold medals. Liddell set a world record in the 400, which stood for more than a decade.

It's a great story and the best line in it, I believe, is, "I believe God made me for a purpose: but he also made me fast. And when I run I feel his pleasure. To give it up would be to hold him in contempt; to win is to honor him."

It is, of course, the most important question of all: What should I do with my life? What is my purpose? What am I supposed to be doing? Is what I'm doing the right thing? Does it matter? It is the question of *vocation*. To put it in a theological context and theological language, What does God want me to do? Or, does God really have an agenda for me, a plan, a program? There simply is no more important question for any of us than that.

One of the best and boldest ideas in the Christian religion is that God does have something in mind for us, each of us, individually. "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good," Paul wrote to the early church in Corinth—words we use as we ordain and install officers for the congregation. And long before that, in the history of God's people, prophets are called.

The year is 627 B.C. The last strong leader of the Assyrian Empire has died, and there are major changes on the horizon for Israel. And at that moment a young boy hears a voice: "Before I formed you I knew you, before you were born I consecrated you to be a prophet to the nations."

It happens several times in the Old Testament. And so does what happens next: "Ah, Lord God! Truly, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy."

The pattern is consistent. God calls. The candidate declines. Moses is tending his father-in-law's flock in the wilderness. A bush goes up in flames and a voice tells him his job is to go to Egypt and liberate his people. And Moses says, in effect, "Who me? Thanks, but no thanks." God calls Jonah to go to Nineveh and Jonah heads out in the other direction. God calls Jeremiah and Jeremiah stammers, "I don't know how to talk. I'm not up to this. I'm only a boy."

God calls. Candidate declines. God won't take no for an answer. God is persistent.

God keeps after Moses, tracks Jonah down all the way to the belly of the whale, says back to reluctant Jeremiah, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy;' for you *shall* go to all to whom I send you and you *shall* speak whatever I command you."

And then the gracious promise: "Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you." And Jeremiah, years later, looked back at that amazing time and remembered: "Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth."

- God calls: Candidate declines on the grounds that he or she is not up to the demands of the assignment.
- God persists
- God promises God's presence and the resources needed to get the job done.

In some ways that is an odd notion—perhaps even bizarre. The voice of God? To me? To you? A real voice? What does God sound like? I used to think Charlton Heston, maybe, until he became involved with the NRA. I never heard the voice of God—at least as a recognizable human voice. And I've come to the conclusion that maybe it wasn't quite that distinct and clear for Moses and

Jonah and Jeremiah either. I've concluded, as I look back at pivotal events and important decisions in my own life, that things look a lot clearer in retrospect than they do at the time. At the time, it's pretty confusing, disturbing: you lie awake at night wrestling with options, you take long walks to sort it out: "Shall I do this or that? What if I go that way? What if I stay put?"

An acquaintance came to see me recently and after preliminary small talk got right to the point. "What I want to talk with you about," he said, "is this. I'm successful. I'm doing exactly what I always knew I wanted to do. Everything in my life is in place. But I'm restless. Is it okay to be forty-five, successful, and restless?"

What a great question. Of course it's okay to be forty-five and restless, or thirty-five, or fifty-five, or sixty-five, or seventy-five and restless, for that matter. Maybe it isn't a clear distinct voice telling us what to do at all. Maybe it's restlessness.

When Jesus walked along the lakeshore, found Simon and Andrew, said, "Follow me," and they dropped their nets and followed, I've always thought there was more to it than that. I've always supposed there was some restlessness in their souls, some sleepless nights wrestling with the meaning and purpose of their lives. I've always believed God was stirring up the souls of the disciples—all of whom, by the way, were second-career people—making them restless, preparing them for the day when Jesus said directly, "Follow me."

One thing is for sure, and it is that there is a lot more fluidity about the subject today than ever before. Time was, not long ago, you made a decision about what to do with your life, took a job, worked at it for forty years and retired with your gold watch and retirement package and moved to Florida. People entering the job market today will change jobs at least five times. And for many of them, it will involve a career change as well. At the far end, a healthy, vigorous, aging population means that it is imperative that we have a vocation that is more than our job—something meaningful to do on the other side of retirement, for the sake of our mental and physical health.

Dr. James Fowler, Professor of Theology and Human Development at Emory University, writes that "vocation is bigger than job or occupation or career. Vocation refers to the centering commitments and vision that shape what our lives are really about" (*The Chicago Sunday Evening Club,* January 7, 1999).

Sometimes that centering commitment and vision can take the form of a job. God called J. S. Bach to write music and Michelangelo to create art and Sammy Sosa to hit home runs. But sometimes it doesn't work that way. Sometimes the challenge is to find a way to earn a living in order to be able to respond to your true vocation.

If that is the case—if, for a variety of reasons, you simply cannot find a job that corresponds to your sense of your vocation—what is the bottom line? James Newsome says that however we earn a living, God wants and asks from all of us a life of commitment to God and God's ideals for human life.

What does God require of you, the prophet Micah asked, "but to do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with your God."

Newsome writes, "By whatever vocation we earn our bread, we are to shape our lives and help shape the life of the world according to these ideals" (*Texts for Preaching*).

My colleague, Dana Ferguson, last Sunday told the story of Perry Reese, a remarkable basketball coach in Berlin, Ohio, a small, all-white, mostly Amish and Mennonite community, which hadn't changed much in 200 years. Reese was an African American, the only black person in eastern Holmes County. He was also single and Roman Catholic. He was hired to be an assistant. When the head coach resigned unexpectedly and Reese, by default took his place, Hiland High School began to win basketball games—in unprecedented numbers, finally, unbelievably, a state championship. Along the way, Coach Reese won the acceptance, affection, and respect of the community because of his quiet grace, his personal strength, and his loyalty to the youngsters. High school kids loved him, hung out at his house, and when some of the basketball players made a big mistake—they broke into and stole merchandise from a hardware store—Reese took personal responsibility for them and visited them daily in the juvenile detention center. He made good friendships, was a good neighbor, and wore his love and his passion for his job and his kids on his sleeve. When he was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor, Berlin, Ohio discovered that it had changed deeply and profoundly because of Perry Reese's work. And when he died, Berlin knew itself to be a community in new ways. A star player decided to "reverse coaches' path and teach and coach black kids in Canton." A scholarship fund Coach Reese established with his own life's savings took off. And of all things, white, rural, Mennonite Berlin families started to do something unthinkable after he died.

"Shelly and Alan Miller adopted a bi-racial boy. The Keims adopted two black boys, the Shrochs adopted four black girls, the Masts—two black girls, Chris Miller in the next town over, adopted a black girl."

Coach Reese's job was teaching and coaching. His vocation was building community, a community, the uniqueness of which even the *Sports Illustrated* writer recognized.

At his funeral, the entire community gathered in St. Peter's Catholic Church and the priest did something as unlikely ecclesiastically as a black coach leading a team of short, cropped, Mennonite kids to a state championship: he invited everyone to come to the Sacrament of Holy Communion. They came—Mennonites, Baptists, Catholics—"busting laws right and left," the *Sports Illustrated* writer wrote, "busting straight into the Kingdom of Heaven."

How do you know? How do you know what you are supposed to be doing? Professor Fowler is helpful in observing that Christians ordinarily cast the topic in negative terms. That is, God's will, God's call—is not something you would choose if left to your own devices. To respond to God's call is self-denial, self-sacrifice. Well, maybe. Maybe not. Maybe God's will is what you most powerfully and profoundly want.

"Hast thou not seen, how thy desires ere have been, granted in what he ordaineth," the great old hymn asks.

Last Monday night, Peter Gomes was speaking here as part of McCormick Seminary's McCormick Days. Gomes is a distinguished professor at Harvard and preacher at Harvard's Memorial Church. He was speaking on the "Word of God in the World, the Academy, and the Church." Afterwards, in the question-and-answer period, a young man popped up and asked, "Professor Gomes, how can I know what God wants me to do?" Now that was not the topic. Gomes had not mentioned vocation. But it was on the young man's mind, and I concluded it is on the minds of a lot of us. Gomes told his own story. He didn't like science or math, he said. He liked going to church and had a loud voice, so being a teacher or minister seemed about right, and then he quoted something Frederick Buechner wrote: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

Or, as Eric Liddell put it, "I believe God made me for a purpose; but he also made me fast. And when I run I feel his pleasure. To give it up would be to hold him in contempt; to win is to honor him."

After the Olympics, Eric Liddell returned to school, became a missionary in China, and died in a Japanese prison camp just a few weeks before the camp was liberated by American troops in 1945.

God has something in mind for you, work to do, community to create, people to love, lives to save, the kingdom of God to build. The promise is that once you know what it is, there is nothing to fear. God will be with you and give you the resources you need. It may or may not be the work for which you are paid. But it is God's precious gift to you—your vocation—God's call. Amen.

Prayers of the People
May 6, 2001
Steve Runholt, Pastoral Resident

"Yes" is the word we want to say to you this day, O God. Yes to your call. Yes to our best selves. Yes to the redemption of the world. We know your call goes out to all humanity without end or limit, and we thank you for that. It's your call to us, to each person here now, that we struggle with.

God, we're stunned and grateful that you love us enough to call us. We're stunned and grateful that you desire us and want to be in relationship with us. Your call provokes us, like friction provokes a match; it comforts us, challenges us, amazes us, and sets our lives ablaze.

Please give us ears to hear your call amidst the deafening din of city life. Give us hearts to receive it, to make yours the first voice we respond to in days filled with competing voices. Give us strength to bear your call, O God, when we come to our own Gethsemanes and would prefer that not your will but ours be done.

We give you particular thanks this day for those who have accepted the call to be officers in this church. Bless them in their service and guide them in their leadership. Blend their diverse voices together into singularity of purpose.

God, together we are the church this day and every day, and so we lift up our concerns to you now in faith and hope and love. We pray for loved ones and unloved ones, that all might be touched by your grace. And we pray for our world in its increasing need—that grace and peace and justice might prevail in Macedonia, Syria, the Philippines, the United States.

Finally we pray for ourselves, that you would give us the courage to follow our Lord Jesus, who calls us to be his disciples, who showed us that you love us like a mother, and who taught us to pray, saying, Our Father . . .